



News Release

IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES
1301 N. Orchard St., Boise, ID 83706 - TEL: (208) 327-7900 FAX: (208) 327-7866
Internet Homepage: <http://www.idwr.state.id.us>

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GROUND WATER LEVELS SHOW DECLINES DUE TO PAST YEARS OF DROUGHT

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For Media Information Contact:
Dick Larsen - (208) 327-7933

Near normal water supply readings in the southern half of Idaho may have many residents believing the effects of the past two years of drought are on the decline. But that message doesn't square with the experiences of well users across the southern half of the state whose wells are running out of water due in part to dropping ground water levels, drilling managers with the Idaho Department of Water Resources said today.

In southern Idaho, a review of ground water levels in wells scattered across the Gooding to Shoshone region shows water level declines of more than 30 feet just in the past year. In Eastern Idaho, IDWR drilling managers are trying to cope with surging numbers of well drilling applications from people who say they need to drill new wells or deepening existing ones.

IDWR offices have also seen an increase in calls from the public looking for financial assistance to deepen existing wells that have gone dry or to drill new, deeper wells. However, IDWR has no funding to provide assistance.

The problem appears to grow worse the further east in the state you go. South Central and Eastern Idaho have been particularly hard hit by drought in the past couple years and the impact of those years of surface water shortages now are showing up in declining ground water levels.

In southwestern Idaho the demand for drilling permits is relatively unchanged from a typical year.

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In southern Idaho, IDWR drilling officials say they are experiencing a marked increase in the number of applications for drilling permits compared to a normal year. The majority of the requests are to deepen existing wells or to drill new wells due to ground water level declines.

The situation appears worst in eastern Idaho. IDWR's Eastern Regional Office in Idaho Falls has already received more than 600 requests for well drilling permits in the first five months of this year. In a typical year the Office will process about 400 applications. Officials say drilling firms in the Idaho Falls area now are backed up three to four weeks due to the heavy demand.

Ironically, a general review of water levels in the Blackfoot to Idaho Falls region shows declines in ground water have been relatively minor – in the range of 5 to 10 feet, similar to that experienced during the 1987-1993 drought. While there may be some localized areas of greater decline, officials say the demand may in part be coming from a general belief prompted by surface water shortages that the problem is far worse than it actually is.

Hydrologists also note that ground water levels are often greatly influence by irrigation and tend to run about a year behind surface water supply statistics. That's the time it takes for surface water to percolate down to recharge the aquifers that supply the wells. That means any improvement in this year's surface water supply and use will not show up in improved ground water levels for at least a year or even longer depending on the size of the aquifer.

Drilling managers say part of the problem may also stem from wells drilled with the minimum depth to the water supply. While this does reduce well construction costs, it can also mean that when periods of drought hit, even small water level declines can result in wells going dry.

Officials recommend that wells be drilled with a 50-foot margin of safety so pumps only need be lowed should water levels drop. This avoids the expense of having the well deepened or a new well drilled.